



Episode 42

How Designers can make Brand Partnerships work for them





Mirjam: [00:00]

Welcome to Designer Discussions with Jason, Maria and Mirjam. Today our guest is Shannon Polish. She's a marketing strategist, and she's here to talk with us about the different ways interior designers can collaborate with brands.

Intro: [00:05]

Welcome to the Designer Discussions podcast. Tune in each week where we discuss marketing, branding, PR and business advice for design professionals.

Mirjam: (00:25)

Our guest today is Shanin Polce. She's a brand marketing strategist with experience in the best number of industries. We actually work together professionally right now, and she's here in her capacity as the marketing boss of PPG, which part of that company is Speakman, which is a shower. It's famous for its shower heads and faucets. And we want to talk about brand partnerships and how interior designers can leverage and easily create brand partnerships.

Shanin: (00:35)

Great. Thanks for having me here today.

Mirjam: (01:14)

Welcome, Shanin. I'm very excited to talk to you about this because I feel like it's a topic that is widely misunderstood. And I know that you at PPG and with Speakman, you pretty much cover all the different options, how brands can partner with interior designers and influencers. And I want us to go through it a little bit to sort of dissect for people what the different options are. But first, tell us just a little bit about yourself.



Shanin: (01:35)

Yeah, sure. No problem. Mirjam, thank you. My role here at PPG, as you kind of mentioned, I'm not sure I would call myself the boss per se, but basically, I am marketing services manager. I do oversee our two proprietary brands known as Speakman and Wolverine Brass. I handle everything that would have to do with amplifying our brand reach, whether that's through advertising, promotions, PR, or social media. There's a lot to do. Yeah, there's a lot to do. As you mentioned, are two brands. One is basically for the trade professional. We supply roughing plumbing products under the Wolverine Brass brand just for trade pros. So anyone that might be in the construction business, residential, plumber, et cetera, would be familiar with our Wolverine Brass brands. And then, of course, Beakman are commercial grade fixtures known across the hospitality industry. And we have shower heads, like you'd mentioned, Faucets, Vitreous, China, everything to elevate the bathroom experience from initially that hospitality perspective. But now we're going after homeowners alike. So that's really where our brand partnerships come to life.

Mirjam: (03:09)

Yeah, it's been a very exciting journey, for sure. So let's dive a little bit into I'd like to talk about basically three different types of brand partnerships. There's the paid influencer partnerships. And I think that's usually what everybody spontaneously goes to when you talk about brand partnerships. But that's just one aspect of it. And on the other end of the spectrum, there's the licensing partnerships. And Speakman actually has a couple of those also with more high profile designers. And then the third kind is really where I want to spend the bulk of the time chatting. And I call them grassroots partnerships. And where brands and designers sort of organically align and collaborate. So just from your experience and how you handle it at Speakman, if you want to say a few words about each of those different types of partnerships, and then we spend some more time talking about how you can create those grassroots relationships.

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**Shanin: (04:35)**

Absolutely. So our paid influencers are often referenced as bloggers. You know, these individuals really at the core understand search engine optimization, search engine marketing. They understand SEO ranking. There's a lot of work done. These are really content creators at the core, regardless of their industry professions and what have you or their key focus areas, whether it could be beauty and wellness or DIY or design like we're talking about here today. But they actually build their content for very specific purposes. These individuals can have managers. They're often found within all social media channels as well. They take just a lot of care in the way that they create their content. They may also have break cards which are available kind of readily when we're up on request. Yeah.

Mirjam: (05:09)

It's like what people like to call a media kit. Right. Where they tell you how much their services cost.

Shanin: (05:35)

Right. But their content, so organically appears in searches. When you're looking for any design topic or best shower head, you can really dive in and start searching for content. And it very organically kind of comes to the top of those search engine results. And so the one thing to think about here is these paid relationships definitely have a place within the marketing media mix, but they're not the only way that someone can have a relationship with brands and what have you. Like I said, they do have a place. They understand their engagement rate, they understand the click to buy, the swipe to buy, and everything in between. They can really even begin to make a whole revenue stream all on their own when it comes to affiliate marketing and understanding where brands live on the digital shelves. So they're very savvy and well respected, usually as well within their specific areas that they work in. So then our licensed partnerships, these are really high profile designers. We're very fortunate here at Speakman to have worked with two world renowned designers, one of those being Roger Thomas of the Wind Hotels. And he basically creates the beautiful interiors found within Wind Hotels.



Shanin: (07:35)

He's now retired or semi retired at this point, but just creating those beautiful, luxurious environments. And then we also have partnered with Quota. She is known for her work with Miraval Resorts and Spas. Basically, she kind of marries together design in nature and is known as one of the designers that has basically brought green and sustainability design to the forefront. One of the early designers doing so. And so when I think about license partnerships, basically this is kind of co branding. You're bringing together that designers brand and experience to life with product. And so that's usually brought to life with the opportunity to work with large construction projects such as hotel design or what have you. And I like to think of it as when you walk into a luxury hotel, what's the first thing that you feel they create that from the ground up, and so that when you transcend from one space to the next. I'm sure that you guys all probably have hotels that come to mind right, from vacation, and it takes you that escape and that immediate connection to something else or going into a different space. That's what they work so hard for, which requires them to create their textiles, their wallpaper and fixtures, and everything really from scratch to be able to achieve that end result, that vision that they have for that design. So that's how our license partnerships come into play. They're mutually beneficial. Both the manufacturer or the brand represented as well as that designer, openly promote the products. And the beauty of it is those products usually go from high end luxury hotel to being available to homeowners alike. So we do love those license partnerships and relationships with our world renowned designers as well.

**Mirjam: (09:09)**

And it can really work well. I know that having licensing deals is a goal of many interior designers. And if we can put it in perspective, and I mean, obviously, these are two very big names that Speakman has partnered with. But that's usually what the brand is after, right? It needs to be an interior designer who's well established, who has lots of credibility, who's usually gotten fair amounts of PR in the past, and that's helped establish their status within the industry. So it really getting a licensing deal with a brand is sort of at the tippy top of the PR marketing scale for an interior designer. So there's a lot of things that need to be established before you honestly can approach a brand with a licensing proposal.

Shanin: (10:40)

You're absolutely right. And it does take years of experience and often well recognized awards. You mentioned PR. PR such an important part. There's one thing a designer must do for themselves. They have to build their name and their brand, and that comes with a core focus on PR as well, which is a whole separate effort in and of itself.

Mirjam: (11:05)

Very true. So now what about the area in between for interior designers who are not influencers, strictly speaking, who may have a presence on social media larger or smaller, but who do beautiful work and are interested in collaborating with a brand? It's like, how do you handle that in your business?



Shanin: (11:40)

Yeah, absolutely. That's a great question. We love our grassroots partnerships, really. It's where our brand kind of hits our sweet spot, so to speak. These individuals help us with that content creation portion of things. We're fairly generous with our partnerships and what have you. Really? We partnered with everything from nonprofit organizations, working with designers who are just getting their start to rehab homes and things that may be used for a number of different things. And they request products in order to help make the project come to life. And that's really at the core where it starts. You have a need as a designer. You don't have the budget, but you have the project. Right. And whether that is your work coming to life for free, small monetary compensation or even at the highest of levels. But you're looking for how do I make all of this happen within a budget available to you? And let's be honest, kitchens and bathrooms, which Speakman is known for those are high dollar value renovations. So really all it takes is outreach to the brand. We love to see basically all of your design inspiration and putting that in front of us and putting your plans in front of us. It could be a sketch, it could be CAD drawings or anything in between. It could be flat lays of textiles and fixtures. There are a lot of digital tools out there to help designers do those types of flat lays and borrow materials, textiles and wallpapers and everything from a digital perspective to really be able to put it in front of a brand and say, I would really like to help bring your product to life in my upcoming project. Would you be willing to partner? I think the biggest failure when it comes to grassroots partnerships is not asking from the start what's the worst thing you're going to be told?

**Mirjam: (14:40)**

No, that's part of the process from all the conversations we've been having. And maybe Maria can comment on this, too. But there are a lot of designers who feel very insecure about doing that because they don't feel like it would be of interest. And I always tell them it is the opposite. It's like all brands, especially the smaller, midsized brands, they love to hear from interior designers. And content creation is such a challenge from a budgeting standpoint, like, for you to build out bathroom and kitchen set costs a fortune. Right. So if you can have your product placed in a beautiful project that's designed by a designer who creates great work, it's a complete win win for both parties.

Shanin: (15:04)

Absolutely. I agree. And I'm not sure if Maria has anything she would like to add there, but it's definitely I can understand both sides of the fence. Right. That insecurity because you're afraid of the no. But I think it's practicing that outreach. And just as if you were going on a job interview or what have you, you practice that pitch, you finance those details that you want people to know about you or your project, and you have to be willing to put yourself out there.

Maria: (15:45)

So what I was going to say, as an interior designer, it's also expensive for interior designers to redo their homes so that their spaces looked totally up to date. And according to trend so that they can be photographed in their space so that they can provide their social media content. And when you think about putting a product in someone's personal space, they're using it all the time. Plus, if they're having to show up on social media all the time in that space, you're getting all of this repeat repetition and content that just keeps going for the lifetime of the product in the space.



Mirjam: (16:40)

And by the way, the media loves to feature homes of designers. So there's really good opportunity for PR there. And that's another thing. Like, if a designer and a brand partner, if either one of those parties proactively do PR, chances are that it's really I mean, if the project gets published, it's a huge win for both the designer and the brand, right?

Shanin: (15:04)

Absolutely. It's extremely beneficial to everyone.

Mirjam: (16:54)

I agree. And I always encourage designers to just and don't go seeking out the biggest brands or the highest ends. Look at the products that you're already using when you're designing. Right. And there's probably brands in there that would love to partner with you. And one of the things that I always recommend and I know, Shannon, that you'll love this, too, is like, if you have a project and you're using a product tag, the brand whose product you're using without having any kind of direct connection, because the brand is watching. Right. Don't you love it when a designer Tags Speakman in a post, even if there's not a call out to the product but just the tag? And you're like, oh, my God, look at our product. That's so awesome.

Shanin: (17:48)

Absolutely. And I think you raise a really good point. There are ways, like, as I mentioned, within that digital realm to do flat layers, to put some design inspiration together without ever spending a Penny. And that could be the very first post that actually engages the brand, because we do reach out periodically and say, hey, we love your content. Would you consider partnering with us to bring this to life? That's the beauty of social media. And the scroll, right. Is that once a brand is tagged, you have the ability to then see that content creators, other work. And so the social channels, blogs and things of that nature all very important as part of your overall portfolio. It doesn't have to fit within the digital traditional layout of a designer portfolio. It encompasses that entire mix. So drawing sketches, digital elements, social channels, Instagram, you name it. There are brands out there in every industry looking to work with those designers of beautiful content across the entire marketing mix, especially from that digital perspective.



Mirjam: (19:04)

Yes, I know this to be true. Of all the brands I've ever worked with over my entire career, pretty much then a challenge that designers usually have is I don't know how to go about it. It's like, where do I start? And I think social media is one of the ways that you can get in touch. You don't always know who manages that account. It may be outsourced, maybe somebody very junior who's working on that, who may not have the right connections. So I always recommend the other way to do it is you find, I always say, the PR contact because they're usually the ones who liaise between design or sent the brand. Or it's sometimes hard to find contacts on the website. But if you find a PR contact, I'd say start there because they're for sure going to connect you with the right person within the company, right?

Shanin: (20:19)

Absolutely. And again, for every three or four attempts to connect, you may get one. But one solid connection goes a long way. I do suggest utilizing social media inboxing asking that your information be passed along. In some instances, customer service at a specific company can put you in touch with the right person because their job is to solution solve. And so that's just another Avenue that you can go as well. But I would strongly suggest looking for that PR contact first because they're all about networking and making sure the brands are well connected and well represented across the entire marketing mix. So the other Avenue is LinkedIn may or may not be something utilized by designers. I know a lot of creatives have kind of overlooked that space as an opportunity in years gone by and what have you in the past, but I think even a minimal presence within LinkedIn can always go a long way.

Mirjam: (21:31)

Agreed. I think that's a really helpful tip. And LinkedIn, I know there are some designers on LinkedIn, but probably not as many and as active as they could be. So that's an excellent tip.

Shanin: (21:19)

Yeah, because a lot of people have you can inbox people there at least find the name, and then you go to the search, right. Take the name, go to the search and find them online. So it makes it a little bit easier. And I personally being kind of in charge of the specific area for the professional plumbing group Speakman will bring brass, et cetera. Really never frown upon any type of outreach and ability to connect with someone new because you never know when the opportunity will present itself to have that mutually beneficial relationship.

Mirjam: (22:31)

Well, Shanin, thank you so much. I think this is really good information and information that's not often shared within this industry. And I think it's not just applicable to your company, but it really applies across the board. And I wish that more designers would take advantage of all these wide open opportunities that are out there with all these brands that are really just waiting to hear from them. And hopefully, if they listen to this, it will encourage them to take some action.

Maria: (23:02)

What would be the earliest a designer could reach out to a brand and ask them to have an opportunity to work with them? What would they need to have in their repertoire, in their resume for them to have some credibility.



Shanin: (23:19)

Quite honestly, there are a few unique opportunities a designer could take advantage of. The first one that really comes to mind is the one room challenge. It gives a designer the opportunity to start at the very basic of levels. These individuals may not have any experience. They might just be getting their start, and maybe a passion might be coming from that DIY perspective. They know that they've enjoyed this realm and space for some time, maybe have dabbled in it for one reason or another. But honestly, from Speakman's perspective, it's never too soon in your career to really make that connection. If you're looking to participate in something substantial like the one room challenge, like the Jeffrey Court challenge, there are design challenges out there that are going to help you as a designer get exposure to brands like ourselves who like to partner with designers and bring our products to life for that content creation. It really helps us in our journey as a brand. When I think about Speakman, we were known as the hospitality and really commercially focused brand that has switched from that focus over to also including the digital shelves for retailers and retail. As you expand the channels that a brand is available at, you know, you really need to focus on that marketing mix to bring your products to life. And the one thing I don't think we really talked about, but when you think about brand exposure also, it's not all just user generated content, which a designer can provide. There's user generated content and then there's the exposure piece. As well as brand positioning, the exposure can help us fine tune a specific target audience that you would find shopping in a specific retailer that's going to help our brand. The more we know about your audience and who we're trying to reach. And the digital realm helps us to get to those marketing details. What is your engagement, what does your target audience look like within your social channels? And what have you and who are we getting exposed to from that demographic psychographic perspective in order to be able to magnify our brands to that audience, then when you tie in that positioning piece, there could be specific opportunities with brands that you can help them to really differentiate their product. We started as a brand in hospitality and are known for that iconic showering experience.

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Shanin: (26:19)

The experience is really what transcends our entire branch. And how do you bring that to life in something that's attainable and relatable to someone who is walking into a big box retailer looking for shower heads, for fixtures? And how do you make your brand attainable and relatable? And that's what they can help us to do. They also become our long term advocates. So I think, Maria, that's a very long answer to your question about how soon is too soon, but it really depends on the journey that you're about to embark on as a designer and what have you. We've had some join the challenge and not finish until a year later. That's the anomaly in the situation. But the brand is interested from the speaker perspective of those long term partnerships. How do we continue to bring those new on trend, as you mentioned, Maria, spaces to life because you run out of budget and what have you to continuously bring your own space to life. And so that's something to always take into consideration. And we're thankful for those advocates and brand partnerships that we created. We watch some of our designers really grow tremendously in their journey. And that's one beautiful thing. As a brand. We can also help you through social media to continue to get exposure to other brands and what have you and our audiences. We work with rep agencies and all kinds of other manufacturers and partners to make things come to life. And so that's one thing. That's the beauty of social media. Right, Jason, you get to tag people and social algorithms when you're tagged as a brand and someone reacts with it, their audience has been a portion of their audience then serves that same content. So you continue I like to use the word magnify, but it's all about magnifying. That brand reach, and it comes from both sides of the fence, from the designer side as well as the brand side.

**Mirjam: (29:19)**

Yes, that's very true. So basically, it's never too soon to reach out. And you don't have to know anything. You don't have to know all the details about the brand and what they're doing and who they're trying to go after. But you share what you have to offer. And then the brand's job is to figure out how you may fit into their strategy, and chances are there's going to be a way. So everybody. Yeah, let's start reaching out and talking about reaching out. Shannon, where can people learn more about PPG Speakman and about you?

Shanin: (29:38)

Oh, absolutely. So I personally am on LinkedIn. If anyone would like to connect with me, you can find me there. And that's Shanin, S-H-A-N-I-N which is the only thing that really makes me unique. And so you can find me on LinkedIn. I'd be happy to connect with you and help you to network if you're even just getting your start or what have you and design the brand you can find speakman at www.speakman.com. And the same for Wolverine, Grass, you can find us on Instagram and Facebook as well. Those are most active social channels. And we do have brand presence on LinkedIn also, but more from that professional perspective and less from the design perspective. So we're happy to connect with any of you as well as my entire team as well. Thank you.

Mirjam: (30:32)

Awesome. Well, thank you so much for coming on. We appreciate it. Lots of good information and we'll hear everybody else next week on designer discussions.

Shanin: (30:44)

Thank you so much.



Maria: (30:48)

If you found this episode helpful share it with a friend and leave us a review or feel free to ask us a question. We'll read our comments at the end of our episode.

Outro: (30:59)

We hope you enjoyed this episode of designer discussions. What was your takeaway care to share your thoughts and tag Jason, Maria and Mirjam on social media. You can find them on all platforms@designerdiscussions.com. Don't forget to like, subscribe and leave a review or comment for this episode from wherever you are listening.



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